

INSTINCT OF THE RACE

Drawings by M. Leone Bracker

By JOHN S. LOPEZ

changed his name to the Russian "Nicholsky"? There it was over his door. As if the Gentile turn to it would deceive anyone! But though they sneered and said it was an honor to the race that such a one denied it, yet they hated him for a renegade.

Even dear old Mother Rosenberg held this ill estimate of Nichelstein, and to her lodgers this was more damning than a Supreme Court decision. She was the most impractical landlady that ever offered a retreat to newspaper men hoping on in the face of space limitations. Tender hearted—well, the worst to be said of her was that she kept nine depraved cats that she had taken in one at a time to keep from starving. There were times, in the early mornings, when we swore rebellion; but always came the warning recollection that this great soft-heart was so gullible that the flimsiest hard-luck story could run on in serial form for unending weeks.

Mother Rosenberg, I say, held this ugly opinion of Nichelstein, and whenever his name was mentioned there came into her faded old eyes the expression of good Catholics when they cross themselves to ward off an evil influence. It is well to make clear the standing of Moses Nichelstein in his community.

TO be sure, Mother Rosenberg has nothing to do with the story, except that in her establishment I met Maury Green. Maury was everything just short of something on the Jewish Morning Herald. He was the staff and all the assistant editors. There was one real editor, old enough to die before long, and he got sixteen dollars a week. Maury got whatever else could be held back from the printers and the paper manufacturers. Sometimes this was real money; but usually it was orders for goods on advertisers. Mrs. Rosenberg used to accept these for Maury's lodging and board; though it kept her running over the whole ghetto for her supplies. Once, I remember, we had dried cod for every meal for a time because the only order Maury could scare up was on a fish dealer.

Maury reported everything, from weddings—of which there were many—to shirtwaist makers' strikes, of which there were almost as many. He set type, solicited ads, wrote them, and then worked hardest of all collecting the bills. He did this only when Mrs. Rosenberg needed anything, or one of us needed anything, or he himself needed anything. But it kept him pretty busy.

It didn't make much difference what was required. Given time, Maury was a wizard at twisting and turning till you got it. Once Firetop McCarthy needed a shirt, and all Maury had was an order on a dealer in dill pickles and sauerkraut. Mac was on the suicide edge because he was to call that night on a brand new girl, a "peach," and not a calling shirt in the house would be back from the Chinaman's till Saturday. So Maury took his order for sauerkraut to a jeweler who could use it, and swapped it for a smaller order. Then he trotted the jeweler's order to a haberdasher whose watch needed fixing, and, presto! the sauerkraut became a shirt. But, as might have been expected, he took a shirt with wide pink stripes, and it blended with Mac's style of beauty about as effectively as gunpowder mixes with fire.

Nichelstein's little clothing repair shop was just round the corner, and we all knew him because he pressed a suit for fifteen cents while you screened yourself behind a packing case in the corner. He had plenty of work

despite his unpopularity. It's all very well to despise a man; but I've never noticed that it kept people from taking advantage of cut prices. Besides, Nichelstein was a clever workman. I recall how cunningly he once manipulated a dress suit that belonged to me and Maury jointly. We wanted the suit to fit both of us, which was manifestly impossible, since I was a bit bigger. But Nichelstein solved the problem by fitting it in between; that is to say, a trifle too tight for me and a trifle too large for Maury. And, really, it did surprisingly well for both of us.

Nichelstein made lots of money; but no one knew what he did with it. One who declared he saw him spending a nickel on anything but the barest necessities would have established a reputation as an irredeemable liar. So they had him placed as a miser; and there was much talk of how he sat in the rear of his shop gloating over hoarded gold.

IT was one evening in late October that Firetop McCarthy, indignant because Levey the shoe man had dunned him for a bill owing less than seven months, began to enlarge on what he called the vampire instincts of Levey and his whole race. McCarthy was something of a poet, especially when swayed by emotion. *Avaricious, selfish, miserly, heartless*, were some of the designations he applied. And then Maury Green, lanky, stoop-shouldered, and near-sighted, courted sudden danger by defending Levey. It is a terrible temptation, you'll admit, for a flame-thatched Irishman to speed his fist in such circumstances; but I averted murder by leading him away.

"Mac is all wrong," he said pleadingly, "to take the externals of a man as the index of his race—wrong even to judge the man by what he seems to be! It is the purpose of a man, not his actions, that counts. There are men despised, despicable by world measures, whose lives are actually an epic!"

He would have it that he could convince me; and whom, of all people, did he name as his example but Moses Nichelstein?

Scoffing did not shake him. Nichelstein was everything charged, he admitted; but it was because he was eager for money! Then he was a miser—worse yet! No, no; that was the story: he wanted the money for someone else—it was a form of restitution—it was to make another happy! Then he told his story.

Years before, in Russia, Nichelstein had loved a Christian girl of good family, and she had loved him. So they had run off and been married. Of course her family cast her off. Then came one of the periodical raids on the Jews, and in it the wife was killed. Nichelstein was a broken man, mentally, physically, financially, unable even to care for their baby daughter Ruth. So he had humbled himself, and the mother's parents had taken the child—provided that Nichelstein would leave Russia forever, would never attempt to see the little one, would never let her know she was half Jewish.

Nichelstein had reserved the right to pay for the child's upbringing; then afterward pride had made him deny himself, so that the amounts he sent would be large. The old man held himself responsible for the Christian wife's destruction. It had become his obsession to repay by assuring the happiness of her offspring. That was why he squeezed the pennies and had made a beast of himself. In the old country they thought him prosperous.

It was too pretty a tale to be true! Still, Green was so earnest that if he had been anything but a reporter I should have believed. Evidently he was talking copy.

Green was pride-stung to loquacity. Why, he had attended to keeping up the deception! He wrote the convincing letters that went to Russia at regular intervals; had started to do so when he was a schoolboy, keen for pennies. And of late he had been spreading himself. Lord! the things he had written! And if I still doubted, he would furnish indubitable proofs. He would take me to Nichelstein's!

IT was bitter cold when we reached the front of the shop, and as we stopped outside to peer through the curtains the church bell opposite began to peal. The old man's head lay to his shoulder with the unmistakable droop of sheer exhaustion. And now, at the clang, he roused with a shudder, forced open his eyes, and finished a stitch that drowsiness had stopped halfway in the coat he was sewing. The frigid air inside showed in the haze of his breath, and his numbed fingers fumbled the work.

Nichelstein threw the garment aside, stamped his feet, blew his breath through his hands one at a time, and finally held them greedily to the smoky oil lamp at his side. As the welcome glow spread through his fingers he shuddered catlike, and then drew his face down close to bask in its heat. It was a pantomime of



"Years before, Nichelstein had loved a Christian girl of good family."

EVEN in a ghetto there is such a thing as stretching thrift to miserliness; and Moses Nichelstein had overleaped the bounds. Ask the tiniest New York ghetto tad, and he would check the items off with commercial exactness, spitting out with each an execration.

Had Nichelstein not forsaken the God of his Fathers, withdrawing from the congregation when he was asked to contribute? Did he not forsake food that was kosher in order to save a penny or so, though it would damn his soul, and besides robbed the meat dealers of his own race? Did he observe Yom Kippur by refraining from work, or contribute even a penny to the Jewish poor during the sacred holidays? Not he, the dog! Instead he robbed the poor,—got in line and took the matsoth that the charitable gave away. And, worst of all, he had even refused to fashion free of charge the shroud in which the good Rabbi Epstein was buried, although the cloth was furnished by others. And this a Rabbi so loved for his good works that even the poorest hot-potato men missed a meal to help pay for the funeral!

Surely he was a pariah! But if his race had forsworn him, he had done the same for it. Else why had he